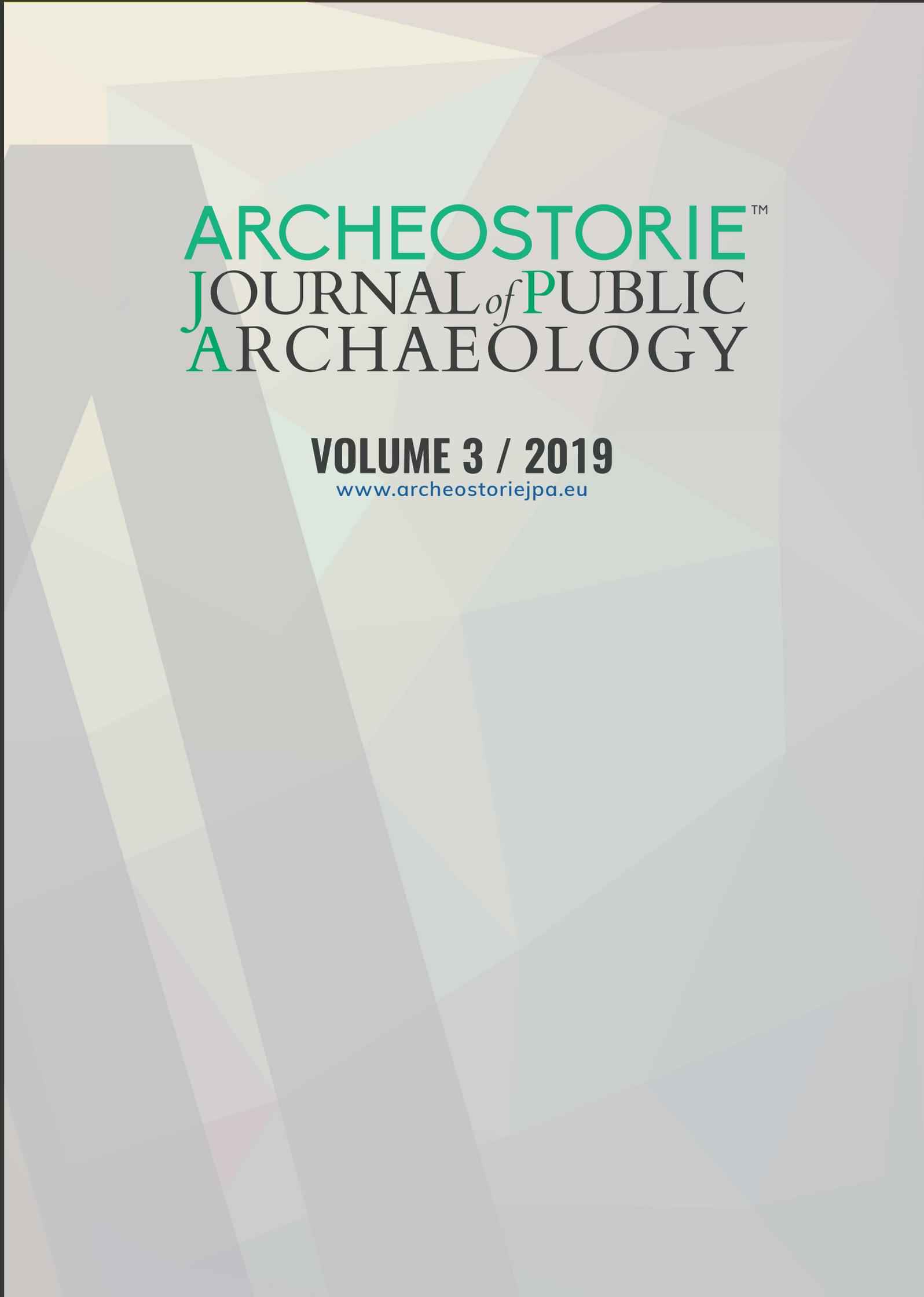




ARCHEOSTORIE®
JOURNAL *of* PUBLIC
ARCHAEOLOGY

VOLUME 3 / 2019

Topic of the Year: Museum Archaeology



ARCHEOSTORIE™
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ARCHAEOLOGY

VOLUME 3 / 2019

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Alessandra Cilio

The Museo delle Culture and its audience: A five-year balance

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Abstract

In 2015, in a period of lively debate around the role of museums in the era of globalization which involved major European institutions, Milan witnessed the opening of the Museo delle Culture – Mudec, in a former industrial area that is now mainly devoted to design and fashion. The Museum’s permanent exhibition was arranged so as to present a layout of the City of Milan’s public archaeological and ethnographic collections, stressing the relations between local history and a global background embedded in a selection of objects. Next to a markedly introspective permanent collection, the Museum’s cultural policies were broadened to embrace a wider public, consisting of native communities settled in Milan, thus offering a counterpoint on the heritage that might tell a local, as well as a global, two-century long history of migrations through the objects on display.

 Open Access  Peer Reviewed  **Keywords:** world cultures museums, migrations, global history, participation

“When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship – power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull.”
(Clifford 1997, pp. 192-193)

Introduction

Over the last thirty years, an intense debate has developed around museums in industrialized societies, pinpointing historical blunders and the need to make changes. As early as the 1970’s, the round table held in Santiago in 1973 (De Varine 2000) – which promoted the idea of an ‘integral museum’ that plays an active role in society – paved the way to several reflections that will not only broaden the role of museums within the society, but will also change their actual structure, so as to become places servicing the people that make up a society (Ames 1992; Karp & Lavine 1995; Simpson 2001; Weil 1999). The idea of curatorship drastically changed as well, thus determining an inner evolution of many historical institutions (Kreps 2003). Part of the reflection that has touched upon museums also concerns a new definition of the concept of ‘exotic’ in a contemporary key and the study of its evolution over the centuries

(Greenblatt 1991; Mason 1998; Padgen 1993). Many museums, especially ethnographic museums, have revised their cultural policies, their missions and staff and, sometimes, even their actual denominations (Pagani 2013, p. 155; see also below).

It is in this historical context that Mudec opened to the public in 2015, in a former industrial area of Milan that is now mainly devoted to design and fashion (Figure 1).

The museum’s permanent exhibition entitled *Objects of Encounter* was set up to present the history of the city’s public non-European archaeological and ethnographic collections from the 17th century to the post-World War II era, stressing the relations between



Fig. 1. Mudec. The Museum building, opened to the public in 2015 (photo Oskar Da Riz).

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■ **How to cite** Orsini, C. 2019. The *Museo delle Culture* and its audience: A five-year balance. *Archeostorie. Journal of Public Archaeology*. 3: pp. 25-36. DOI: https://doi.org/10.23821/2019_3b/

local history and a global background that are evidenced through a selection of objects. Against this historical backdrop, the exhibition also documents the changing nature of the encounters between Milan and the Region of Lombardy and the various cultures that these collections represent in a substantial form, tracing a second history – that of the evolving attitude towards ‘the Other’ and ‘Otherness’. In other words, rather than classifying artifacts geographically or ethnically as what were once called ethnographic museums traditionally do, *Objects of Encounter* introduces the various cultures represented in terms of how people from Milan and Lombardy came into contact and ‘looked at themselves’. Needless to say, these contacts have deeply affected us: the way we observe has changed over time, and likewise has the pursuit of collecting (Orsini 2016).

The cultural approach used for *Objects of Encounter* therefore involves the selection of 300 objects divided into four large sections of the museum’s exhibition. Approximately 40% of these objects are archaeological remains coming mostly from the Americas.

Visitors can observe how the different approaches to view these cultures have profoundly influenced the way the collections

were gathered, and the way the objects, in turn, contributed to project a certain image of ‘Otherness’ into the society that used them (extensive literature supports the assumption that museums were established in industrialized countries with the specific purpose of defining a cultural identity, using often the ‘Otherness’ as a means of comparison, see Gourievidis 2014). This enables the Museum to go beyond its traditional conservation and exhibiting functions, thus acting as a stimulus to explore social dynamics and the ‘human agency’ in museum practices (*sensu* Dubuc 2011). This type of deeply introspective approach aims to present the history of collecting non-European materials as a fundamental moment of reflection on the many interpretations that these objects have produced on the people who originally collected and admired them, and finally on us, who have taken care of these items for a certain amount of time, and arranged the exhibition. The idea was to provide visitors with tools to read the non-neutral messages deriving from the display of these objects, as a crucial step for a decolonized view of museum communication. If collecting interprets the vision that an individual, and overall the society where an individual lives, has of another culture, then



Fig.2. Visible storerooms (photo Mudec).



Fig. 3. The first room of the exhibition opens with a selection of non-european objects from the Manfredo Settala (1600-1680) collection (photo Massimo Fallani).

exploring the choices behind collecting specific objects will reveal facts about the society that produced these choices and on how certain global relationships consolidated in historical periods. The renown of specific objects, the decision to collect certain artifacts instead of others, and the abandonment or neglect of those objects are factors underpinning complex social, economic and power-driven dynamics that reveal key fragments of our mentality: this approach prompts visitors mainly to reflect on the social history of Italy between the 17th century and the Modern era.

In addition to the traditional tour of the museum, visitors can access the storerooms (Figure 2) where the major part of patrimony is conserved: 9,000 objects spanning over more than three millennia, from 1500 BC to the 20th century. Most objects from the Americas and the Islamic area are from excavations, including African pottery and the most ancient part of the Chinese collection. In the storerooms displays have been arranged according to geographical and chronological criteria and the origin of the works: Western and Central Africa, the Middle East and Far East Asia, Southern and Central America and, lastly, Oceania. Here,

students and scholars can access specific areas without the mediation of curators, while the general public can gather basic notions about the objects preserved in the museum and the contexts that yielded them.

Objects of Encounter layout

Objects of Encounter begins with a broad selection from the collection of Canon Manfredo Settala (1600-1680) (Figure 3), an eclectic and eager Milanese collector who, over the course of the 17th century, built a rich collection of *naturalia* (curiosities and finds from the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds), *artificialia* (*naturalia* monstrously or objects artistically transformed by humans), *mirabilia* and *exotica* (*naturalia* and *artificialia* that elicit wonder and astonishment and are expressive of unknown cultures). All pieces came from places that were almost inaccessible at the time – the Americas, the Near East, sub-Saharan Africa, India and China – and documented the fascination that unknown and far-off civilizations held. The Settala Collection, one of the earliest examples of collections of non-European artifacts, largely comprises precious works on loan from the



Fig. 4. Lithic tools on display in the room devoted to the early nucleus of the original paleontological and ethnographical collection founded in 1858 by the City Museum of Natural History (photo Massimo Fallani).

Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana (Mantia 2010 and bibliography therein cited; Rocca 2016).

Interaction with the exotic is the first of these ‘encounters’ that visitors experience in the museum layout.

The second section presents the early nucleus of the original paleontological and ethnographical collection founded in 1858 by the City Museum of Natural History, which comprised objects collected by explorers and missionaries (Figure 4).

Among the explorers, we find the names of some history-making figures in Italian science: travelers like Gaetano Osculati (1808-1894), Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910), and Antonio Raimondi (1824-1890) an expert on Peru and one of the first to study it in-depth. Most of these intellectuals, connected with the Museum of Natural History, lived in a time when Milan was shaken by the turmoil of the *Risorgimento*. Their personal stories, in addition to their specific academic interests, were the basis for a deep motivation to travel and collect objects (Antonini & Orsini 2018; Livi 2008 and bibliography therein cited). Unlike what was happening in other parts of Europe and what would happen with the establishment of the

Kingdom of Italy a few years later, Milan did not enjoy large scientific expeditions enlivened by a desire of study, trade and conquest at that time. Nevertheless, these men considered their political views as having a crucial role in their choices of education and collecting. Documenting and classifying “new” realities, including people that were not industrialized and still living – in their perspective – in a ‘stone age’ (the term, theorized by Christian J. Thomsen, dates back to that epoch and it was meant as the first stage of human cultural evolution based on technology) was an endless source of color that, using a comparative method, saw ‘live’ examples in the prehistoric Italian populations (the *Terramare* civilization) that were discovered during those years in the Po Valley Plains. Prehistory was the “brand new science”, as Pellegrino Stroebel asserted, and it gave a solid historical account to people who were claiming the land against foreign powers on the grounds that these areas had been formerly inhabited by ancient Italic populations. In this case, archeological objects (including, but not limited to, stone industry on a nucleus coming from Latin America) were displayed to exemplify this concept and the

spirit underpinning collecting trends of the time (Laurencich Minelli 1994).

In the same room, the third section is dedicated to the colonial period. A new breed of travelers, like Giuseppe Vigoni (1846-1914), senator of the Kingdom of Italy and Mayor of Milan, headed toward far-off lands, no longer with scientific or religious aims, but with the goal of identifying exploitable resources in view of an actual conquest (Ghezzi 1998). We are at the threshold of the fascist period, and part of the exhibit deals with the political instrumentalization underlying collecting trends and museum display of objects from that epoch.

Also in this case, the objects collected paint a very clear picture of how the re-assignment of their meaning in the museum context reveals the cultural climate during which the objects were collected, preserved and displayed.

As many scholars before us have observed, displaying the biography of the objects (Kopytoff 1986) is a fundamental element to help visitors understand the significance of each object and its 'social life'. Another interesting case is the history of the collection of African 'manilla' bracelets (Chiesa 2016; Grey 1951) on display next to the Vigoni panoply, in a dialogue and in an opposite position with respect to it. This group of 750 objects, set up as an installation of a pile that aims to communicate quantity and accumulation, is what remains of an enormous load of monetary bracelets taken from Western Africa during the early 20th century colonial period. They were first used as ballast in a German merchant ship, then confiscated by the English during World War II and finally sold by the pound as scrap metal. When they arrived at the foundry in Milan, these objects were reassessed thanks to the intervention of an employee who had an extensive knowledge of ethnographic history and convinced his employers to donate them to the civic museum collections. These objects, originally currency and dowries, and then commodities, have been transformed to the status of museum in *Objects of Encounter*.

The final room opens with a video-narrative of the bombardment that struck Milan in 1943, destroying part of the civic collections that had been gathered during the early 20th century in the Castello Sforzesco, restored by Luca Beltrami (1854-1933) to serve as the new central location for all of the City Museums (Tasso

2012). Unfortunately, a large portion of the African and Pacific collections was destroyed or damaged, while the Native American and Asian collections were spared, as they were brought along with materials considered to be more important to the storage facilities in Sondalo, near Sondrio, before the conflict began (Antonini & Orsini 2016, pp. 24-25).

Alongside the video, a selection of the surviving works is presented. The section was set up not only to mark an important moment in the history of the biography of objects in our collections. It was also intended, once again, to demonstrate non-neutral museum choices that strongly influenced what will (or will not) remain of the culture of 'Others' for future generations. These decisions were clearly and drastically affected by the political and social climate at the moment they were made. In 1940, the war was in full swing and Italy was oppressed by Fascism: every public job was held by members of the fascist party, including the curators of the Castello Sforzesco which, at that time, housed the city's non-European collections, including the collections coming from other structures, for example the Museum of Natural History. Apart from propaganda interests in displaying trophies from Italy's African colonies, Fascism has always scorned native cultures, with an anti-historical and openly racist attitude. Therefore, when it came to decide which works to save, the non-European collection was not taken into consideration, except for Japanese artifacts and American archaeology; we have not retrieved any document that might support this decision and we can only make assumptions in this regard (Antonini & Orsini 2016, pp. 24-25). Japanese artifacts were probably spared on political grounds, beside the fact that they had always been considered great examples of technical expertise; American artifacts were probably saved because they were considered archaeology, which the regime held in great esteem, albeit it was not about national archaeology. This choice deeply penalized the historical collection. Today, it is a mere shadow of what it was in the period right before World War II.

The last hall of the Mudec's permanent exhibit is dedicated to the work of four collectors – Ezio Bassani, Alessandro Passaré, Franco Monti and Federico Balzarotti – who were initiated to non-European art through the avant-garde movement. Their collections

began taking shape in the 1950s, right after the end of Fascism, a period when, as mentioned, Italy expressed a strong opposition to the study and collecting of objects originating from the southern hemisphere of the world.

It was a period of great cultural ferment in Italy, a period when artistic production was highly appreciated. In particular, there was a rush to close the gap with the European artists who had experienced the glory days of the 'discovery of *art nègre*'. At that time, these people easily collected objects from Africa, the Americas and Oceania, along with works of art produced by their contemporaries, with a sort of nostalgia, paradoxically not of primitive art, but of primitivism as the legendary moment of discovery (Bargna 2014, p. 21). Through the mediation of these people, their specific interests and their biographies, groups of objects with a constructed physiognomy were collected: 'prototypes' of artifacts that – according to western standards from a certain time in history – are considered worthy of being part of the 'realm of universal art', thus flowing into the mechanisms that convey market value to the capitalist society. These criteria have been revised over time, in part thanks to the contribution of an indigenous view on the significance of this heritage (on African art, see Ogbechie 2011).

Beyond Objects of Encounter

As a conclusion of this brief review on the new layout of *Objects of Encounter*, we cannot fail to recognize that many of these micro-histories have provided an overall picture of the global scenario; nonetheless, the vision that the natives had of these objects and the meaning that they attributed to them is not a primary focus of this exhibit. Therefore, apart from documenting a moment of history of the industrialized world and decrying the collection of objects that often came out after exploiting conditions of inequality or unfair relationships with native populations, our aim is to weigh the sense of their display within our institution today, in a globalized world. Extensive literature describes the change witnessed by museums with particular reference to globalization and migration issues. These changes turn museums into more accessible and participated structures, both from a physical and metaphorical points of view (see Gourievidis 2014, and relating literature).

Like many other major European cities, after witnessing a long history of internal migrations (i.e. people coming to the city from the eastern and southern regions of Italy), over the last forty years Milan has experienced a strong migration from non-European countries and Eastern Europe. Together with Rome, Milan is one of the most markedly multicultural cities in Italy due to its international history, as detailed in previous paragraphs. The Chinese community had been rooted in the area of Via Paolo Sarpi since the early 20th century (Brigadoi Cologna 2017); other communities then settled in Milan throughout the century. Milan currently counts over 450,000 foreign-born residents, ranking as the city with the highest density of foreigners applying for residency permits, as well as the city with the highest percentage of employed migrants (over 70%). The largest represented foreign community has an Egyptian background. More recently, the migratory phenomenon has not only attenuated, but fewer newcomers have economic power; with the current trend recording more migrants requesting political asylum or family reunification. The communities present for longer periods are more stabilized and obtain residency, as is the case in other parts of Italy (*La presenza dei migranti* 2018).

These numbers are low compared with other countries with a strong colonial past, yet high considering the size of Italy.

Today, Milan is more than ever the city of those who have chosen it as their permanent place of residence and not of those who were born here. That is why, in its Articles of Association, the *Museo delle Culture* has introduced principles that assign a primary role to the communities that have originated, or have contributed to originate the objects comprised in its heritage.

Here is an excerpt from Mudec's Articles of Association: "The *Museo delle Culture* of Milan is a center devoted to interdisciplinary research on the cultures from all over the world where, starting from its ethnographic collections and in partnership with our communities, we aim at building a space that may allow a dialogue on the themes of modernity. The Museum's objectives are: research, collection and protection of the material and immaterial cultural expressions of non-European civilizations, the promotion of public participation to the past, present and future heritage of the Museum, the promotion

of a proactive dialogue with the communities concerned, both those identified in the *Forum della Città Mondo* [n.d.r. the World City Forum – an informal group composed by over 500 associations representing approximately 100 international communities in the metropolitan area of Milan] and the specific ethnic groups that acknowledge the heritage of the Museum as a grounding element of their cultural identity [...]”.

In order to implement these key principles, since its inception the Museum has addressed its cultural policies to those groups of citizens (both old and new foreign-born residents) that actually “acknowledge the heritage of the Museum as a grounding element of their cultural identity”. Today, the Museum houses the World City Association (they have an office inside the museum), which was established in the framework of the World City Forum and encompasses 105 groups. This Association was born from a group of activists inside the *Forum della Città Mondo* to act as a legal entity, in order to meet the basic requirements to apply for public tenders and manage projects with a budget. In coordination with the aforementioned Forum, the Museum direction and, above all, a dedicated office (the Networks and Cultural Cooperation Service of the City of Milan), the Association plans and schedules a series of activities involving the spaces of MuDEC and other spaces around the city devoted to cultural promotion.

The Milan, World City special program

If, on the one hand, the World City Association is a proactive institution that allows the enhancement of cultural identities through the Museum’s heritage (many initiatives have been launched in partnership with the Association; for a detailed list, see <http://www.muDEC.it/ita/eventi-3/archivio/categoria/forum-citta-mondo/>), on the other hand, since its creation, the Museum has felt the need to pave the way to an extensive public agenda around a theme to which it attaches great importance: an exploration through the contemporary cultural realities of the diverse groups representing the largest communities based in Milan. The principles underpinning the *Milan, World City* agenda include the creation of an archive on the material and immaterial cultural

expressions of these groups, their interactions with local institutions and traditions, and the presentation to the public of the outcomes of said research and exploration through a rich schedule of events that each year focuses on a different community.

Milan, World City is therefore, first and foremost, a long-standing research project conceived by the *Museo delle Culture* in partnership with the Networks and Cultural Cooperation Service of the City of Milan, thanks to which, each year, in-depth sociological and anthropological studies are carried out on one of the numerous international communities that live in our city. This exploration takes shape through exhibits, conferences and events scheduled within a rich six-month program.

Italian museums are among the public institutions that are less favorable to transformation dictated by participatory processes and societal changes (this topic has been recently debated during the international symposium *Narrazioni plurali: i musei di domani* - Fondazione Fitzcarraldo and Base, Milan, June 27-28, 2019 <https://artlab.fitzcarraldo.it/it/blog/musei-e-narrazioni-come-parlare-ai-nuovi-cittadini>). Museum research activity and practices carried out with and for the community, when concerned, are often viewed as an ancillary service to traditional research, conservation, exhibition and educational actions (there are, of course, brilliant exceptions, see <http://www.patrimonioeinterculturala.ismu.org/>, and also Bodo, Mascheroni & Panigada 2016).

The marginal role ascribed to these practices translates into an assignment of the interactions with the communities to circumscribed sectors, to educational services, which are financed through ad-hoc instruments (contracts or special subventions), rather than through internal resources of the museums. For example, the programs conceived with and for the communities of immigrants are seldom an integral part of museum research projects and almost never do they have a dedicated budget or permanent staff in the museum.

The *Milan, World City* program was launched in 2015 concurrently with the opening to public of MuDEC and, since its first edition, which was devoted to the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities based in Milan, it has witnessed an increase in investments in terms of human and financial resources. As opposed to these

general trends in other Italian museums, the 25% of the overall budget of the institution was allocated to the second edition of the program, which was addressed to the Chinese community and which enjoyed the involvement of several professional figures, a numerous scientific staff, and coordination activity entrusted to three staff from the Networks and Cultural Cooperation Service. Since 2016, the latter has actually become a dedicated service to this program. The same commitment was reserved to the following editions, which focused on the Egyptian community and, this year, to the Peruvian community.

Objectives and operation of the program

As we have said, *Milan, World City* is primarily a scientific program. Over the last thirty years, the museums that conserve heritage 'of the Other' have gone through a profound identity crisis. The principles underpinning their activity, the exploration and documentation 'of the Other' as it had been theorized throughout the first half of the 20th century, lost their meaning from an epistemological point of view, as well as in daily museum practice (see above). Museums are turning from an old stance of 'museums of the Other' into museums of 'World Cultures', as the changes of many of the names of most former ethnographic museums from all over Europe demonstrates. In the museums of 'World Cultures' diverse experiences and methods to tackle human great themes are now dealt with on a more even level, in dialogue rather than contrast with the 'Otherness', with a more active participation compared to the authoritarian curatorship voiced in the past.

The documentation of the change taking place in cultural practices of immigrant communities based in our city was immediately viewed as a theme of crucial interest to understand the reality surrounding us, as well as to take the museum closer to the cultural needs of a city in continuous evolution. Moreover, the documentation and collection of histories connected to the people, which often translate into material symbols or objects of affection, allow to loop the historic heritage that has long been displayed in the City's collections and here on exhibit at *Objects of Encounter* with the contemporary reality of the people who live the city and in the city contributing

with their specific culture. In the exhibit curated by Daniele Brigadoi Cologna with the collaboration of Matteo Demonte *Chinamen. One century of Chinese people in Milan* (March 15-April 17, 2017) within the framework of Milan, World City #02 China (Figure 5), the heritage of the Museum dialogued with objects provided by the Chinese community and created a century-long tale about the oldest community of foreign-born residents in our city. With the inclusion of the Museum's heritage to the exhibits that are an integral part of the World City program and that take shape with the active participation of the communities themselves, we achieve the objective of connecting the objects on display in the Museum to a scenario of global history up to the present day through the story of migration of objects and people, so as to bring out continuity encounters but also the asymmetries raised by past museographic practices. It is a mandatory revolution that is carried out step by step, each time an object on display in our Museum is viewed, weighed and endowed with new significance by the citizens.

The active participation of communities beginning with the preliminary research phases of the program (which always foresees a long and thorough prior sociological and anthropological study carried out in partnership with universities - until now the Università Statale and the Università Cattolica of Milan, and the Università degli Studi of Turin) is part of the process aimed at promoting a self-narrative of migration stories by the actual protagonists, as well as at fostering the participation of specific groups of stakeholders to the life of the Museum. The archive of experiences recorded through the operation of the program will build a heritage of know-how that the Museum wants to conserve and implement in the future, to the same extent it once relied on archives of researchers and field studies. This archive will contribute to improve our knowledge of the cultural groups present in the city and will help recording their changes and evolutions that occur within our urban context, thus enriching our heritage with new, also social, significance.

Starting from the material side of the objects and the themes emerging from an analysis of these objects, we outline a six-month schedule of events, which the various associations concerned with the specific focus group are called upon to organize. The associations will enjoy the support and guidance of the Networks

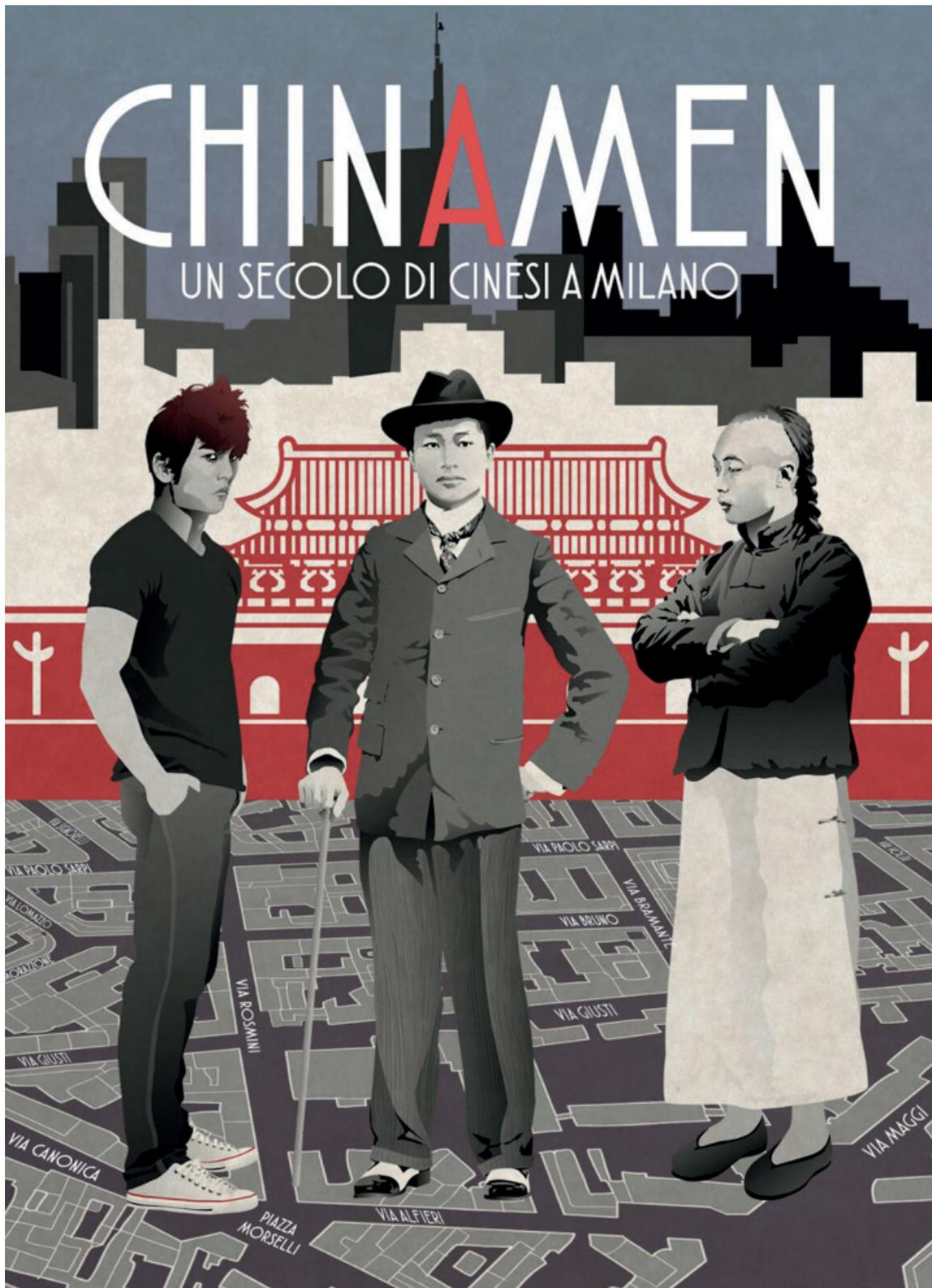


Fig. 5. The temporary exhibition "Chinamen. One century of Chinese people in Milan" (March 15-April 17, 2017) (design Matteo Demonte).

Service and will play a leading role in telling the tale - obviously without any claim to have a universal value - of their community. A tale that will be brought to life through narrative, dance, music, conferences and performances. The schedules of events of the past editions lasted from four to six months with weekly or twice weekly rendezvous. All events were free of charge and enjoyed the participation of over 8,000 visitors.

A project underway

Mudec boasts an ancient heritage, yet it is a young institution. The staff assigned to each project, their expertise, and the stakeholders representing the various communities are growing together with the Museum. Practices and processes aimed at making this global cultural project under the lead of the Museum stronger each year are being fine tuned in this experimental climate. Yet, much still needs to be done on the level of organization, public awareness and participation which, albeit on the rise, risks being sectorial and circumscribed to the groups concerned by the specific theme of the edition. Despite being a program conceived for and with the communities, *Milan, World City* is not simply a social activity devised to attract and involve migrants into the city's cultural life. The quality of the schedule of events, the professionalism underpinning the research, the universality of the themes addressed - each time from a different, specific perspective - are the guiding light that we have followed to make the program appealing to a diverse audience and endow it with international flair and, not least, to make of Mudec a center of out-of-the-ordinary human experiences. A participant

of the workshop held on shamanism through ancient and modern objects selected from the Museum's collections and led by Ana Maria Llamazares in the framework of the fourth edition of *Milan, World City #04* on Peru, left us breathless when he affirmed that that workshop, that room of the Museum (the *Khaled al Assad* space dedicated to the activities of the World City Association) had been a "place of revelation and confessions" for him.

The elders from the Chinese community who followed guided tours held in the Chinese language to the children of 'their' exhibit (see above), people who were moved by seeing their memories staged in the videos that accompanied the various exhibits - from *Egypt Room* for the #03 edition to *Stories in Motion* an exhibition organized for the #04 edition - are just few examples of the success scored by the program in meeting the needs of these people and filling gaps, the same way any public service should do.

But, beyond these ephemeral successes, a question must be raised: to what extent can these life stories be representative and actually tell the reality of the people living in our complex multicultural society? No doubt, only to a minor extent. Nonetheless, what counts most for us is that the project had a definitely strong impact on the life and functions of our Museum, advancing our institution and the people who work for it and inside it along a process of transformation that - we are confident - is for the time being more important when we consider the method endorsed rather than the results achieved. A project that we hope might grow and become increasingly elaborate, comprehensive and effective in telling our everyday life.

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